

The Student - Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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FIXING THE VIEWPOINT.

THERE is more confusion with reference to viewpoint than to any other technical feature of short-story development. Writers are continually advised to employ the single and to avoid the shifting viewpoint; but more stories suffer from error or uncertainty in this particular than from any other ailment.

Certain authorities have gone the length of asserting that the single viewpoint should never be violated. I would hardly make so broad a statement. Superficially, at least, a large proportion of stories published in good magazines violate its principles. But the beginning writer makes a serious mistake in assuming that he can afford to employ the shifting viewpoint because a well-known author does so. The experienced story-teller "gets by" with a tale so handled, because he possesses exceptional finesse. He corresponds to the trained ropewalker, whose skill enables him to cross a chasm on a slender strand of hemp that would be likely to send an amateur funambulist headlong to disaster.

Viewpoint, in fiction, means exactly what it does in ordinary life. It is the position of one who views the incidents. In reading a story, we naturally assume the viewpoint that the author took in writing it, just as in looking at a photographed scene we instinctively assume the position which the camera occupied in recording it.

The single viewpoint, as usually defined, is that of some one person in the story. The author assumes the identity of that character and so, reflectively, does the reader. The most obvious example of the single viewpoint is, of course, found in the first-person story, in which the author relates the experiences as if they were his own. Thus:

I sat for some time before my window, musing on the strange disclosure that my friend had just made. If it were true, I could readily see how it might be to my advantage to give up my roving life, get married, and settle down. With sudden determination, I rose and put on my hat, then started up the narrow lane that joined my cottage with the farmhouse where Mary lived. I found her at home, and imagined that I saw a look of eager anticipation in her eyes, though her voice was calm as she greeted me. I would have given a

great deal to know whether she too had heard the news; but nothing in her manner gave any indication concerning this.

The viewpoint in such a passage is clearly defined. We assume the hero's identity for the time being and see events through his eyes, we hear only what he hears and think only his thoughts. Everything that passes through his mind is known to us, but the mind of Mary is a closed book.

If we should go on to say: "Mary was thinking that this was a strange hour for a call," a glaring distortion would result. Since the viewpoint character does not know what Mary thinks, neither can the reader know. But the same thought can be brought out in a way that does no violence to the viewpoint. Examples: "I suppose she considered it a strange hour for a call;" or, "I learned afterward that she considered it a strange hour for a call." Either phrase gives the thought as it would naturally come through the viewpoint character.

But the first-person narrative is not the only one in which a strict single viewpoint may be maintained. The same paragraph may be written in the third person, with no change except in the pronouns:

Martin sat for some time before his window, musing on the strange disclosure that his friend had just made. If it were true, he could readily see how it might be to his advantage to give up his roving life, get married, and settle down. With sudden determination, he rose and put on his hat, then started up the narrow lane that joined his cottage with the farmhouse where Mary lived. He found her at home, and imagined that he saw a look of eager anticipation in her eyes, though her voice was calm as she greeted him. He would have given a great deal to know whether she too had heard the news; but nothing in her manner gave any indication concerning this. Martin reflected that perhaps she considered it a strange hour for a call.

The same rules apply here that apply to the first-person form of narration. The same care must be taken to guard against discrepancies. If the reader assumes Martin's identity, he can witness nothing that Martin does not witness, nor think the thoughts of any other character. It is good practice in strict singleness of viewpoint to write stories in the first person, then convert them into third person, as above.

When text-book writers speak of the single viewpoint, this is the viewpoint to which they usually refer. It is the simplest form, and the most practical for the writer who is yet uncertain of his technique. This viewpoint makes for vividness of impression. For a time the reader actually lives the life of the viewpoint character.

But there are other single viewpoints. For instance, there is the viewpoint of a spectator. The action is described as it would appear to an auditor in a theater. In a story told from the external viewpoint no unexpressed thoughts of any of the characters in the story can be quoted, but, on the other hand, we are not limited to that part of the action which is witnessed by one character alone.

In order to conform to the external viewpoint, our paragraph would be presented after this fashion:

Martin sat for some time before his window, musing. He had sat thus ever since his friend made the strange disclosure. Brooks had pointed out that, under the circumstances, it would be to his advantage to give up his roving life, get married, and settle down. To this, Martin had made no reply; but suddenly, as if seized with new determination, he rose and put on his hat, then started up the narrow lane that joined his cottage with the farmhouse where Mary lived. He found her at home, and though her voice was calm as she greeted him, a look of eager anticipation could have been seen in her eyes. Nothing in her words or manner indicated whether she had heard the news. "Perhaps you may think it a strange hour for a call," commented Martin.

Each viewpoint brings with it new limitations—and new opportunities. From the spectator's point of view we gain the direct advantage of stating certain things as facts, instead of disclosing them through the mind of a character. We can say definitely that "a look of eager anticipation could have been seen" in Mary's eyes; but we can not state with authority that Martin saw it. We can picture Martin before his window musing, but only by implication can we indicate the probable burden of his thoughts; whereas, from his personal viewpoint it was possible to say just what occupied his mind.

The external viewpoint is rarely advisable. Though sometimes it may help to keep the reader "guessing," it does not permit him to "live" the incidents, and so the effect is usually less vivid than when the personal viewpoint is employed.

One of the most useful of all viewpoints is that which I might call, for want of a better term, the "shadow" viewpoint. A limitation of the strict personal viewpoint is that the central character can not logically picture himself. He is the camera, as it were, through which events are viewed, and it is only by the aid of a mirror that the camera can take its own picture. Mirrors are not always convenient to introduce in fiction. It does not sound convincing for me to say: "My eyes flashed fire; my expression was terrible to behold; I stood before my enemy like an avenging demon." How can I know that I presented such an appearance? I may have felt like an avenging demon, but perhaps to an outsider I looked like a sputtering lunatic. It is all right in a third-person story to say of the viewpoint character: "Mary was serenely conscious of looking her best." That expresses her state of mind. But if we said: "Mary looked her best," we would be assuming the viewpoint of an observer toward her.

So much for what may be termed the personal viewpoint—a single viewpoint centered wholly in one character. But it would undoubtedly be an advantage to have a little more leeway than this viewpoint gives us: a leeway which would permit us to tell not only what our character thought, but how he looked—in fact, to tell some things of which he was unaware, as in this paragraph:

Jake eyed his cards with such concentration that he did not see Frisco Ike slyly draw an ace from his bootleg and slip it into the hand before him. As Jake studied his cards, he was endeavoring to make up his mind whether to "raise" or merely to "call." He felt that his opponent was "bluffing," but his heavy brows gathered in a tense frown as he estimated the cost of going too far. He knew that Ike was a shrewd poker player and that it behooved him to be alert. The roomful of hardened characters reflected the tensify of the moment. All eyes were fixed on Jake; even the barkeeper behind him stopped polishing glasses to await the decision.

Here we have obviously broken several rules, if the viewpoint is limited as before mentioned. We give Jake's thoughts, yet we describe some action that he does not witness, and include descriptive touches which conflict with the limitations of the personal viewpoint. Nevertheless, the paragraph is a legitimate employment of the single viewpoint.

For convenience, I have named this the "shadow" viewpoint.

If the writer does not understand its laws, this viewpoint has many pitfalls. For instance, the question arises: Since we have been permitted to tell what goes on behind Jake's back, are we privileged to stray wider afield and to tell what happened outside of the gambling room?

As a matter of fact, our liberty does not normally extend that far. What, then, are the limitations of this viewpoint?

The answer involves some abstractions which I hope may not be beyond the attentive writer. If they are, he will do best to leave this viewpoint alone.

The viewpoint, while not strictly Jake's, is that of his subjective or astral self, to employ a term familiar to occultists. For fictional purposes, we assume that this shadowy double-self exists and that the story is told from its viewpoint. Consider its properties and limitations. As an extension of the man himself it reaches beyond him, yet is a part of him. It thinks in unison with the man to which it belongs, yet can look at him as an outsider, can see events that he may be too preoccupied to notice. It can observe threatening dangers which he may not realize, but can not warn him—unless he is in a very passive state. It has no separate existence and can not ordinarily witness events that are entirely out of his range; still, it has a definitely wider vision than he possesses. It can not enter into the thoughts of any character other than the man it overshadows.

This may sound like a very difficult and complex viewpoint, yet it is that which the majority of writers instinctively employ. They enter into close accord with the viewpoint character, but do not actually confine themselves to his or her limitations.

The utmost vividness of effect is possible through employing this viewpoint. As in the strict personal viewpoint, the reader enters into the thoughts and emotions of the central character, yet at the same time the character is a vivid external reality. Our illustra-

tive paragraph might be elaborated under this viewpoint as follows:

Martin sat for some time before his window, his frank, handsome features reflecting the intensity of his thought as he mused on the strange disclosure that his friend had just made. If it were true—and at this he smiled his characteristic flickering smile—he could readily see how it might be to his advantage to give up his roving life, get married, and settle down. With sudden determination, he rose and put on his hat—a jaunty hat that made him feel and look younger than he had allowed himself to feel for years. He started briskly—an altogether pleasing figure—up the narrow lane that joined his cottage with the farmhouse where Mary lived. She was at home, and he imagined that he saw a look of eager anticipation in her eyes, though her voice was calm as she greeted him. He would have given a great deal to know whether she too had heard the news; but only the letter concealed in her bodice betrayed that she might have received word, and he did not see the hasty movement with which she hid the letter there. Martin reflected that perhaps she considered it a strange hour for a call, and his expression was rather anxious as he opened the conversation.

This may or may not be an improvement on either the strict personal or the strict external viewpoint. The point is that it gives us greater freedom than either form, although it has its limitations. It permits us to paint a picture that is richer in atmosphere and details. It allows us to tell what Martin thought, how he looked, and to include mention of some things within the range of the "shadow" viewpoint, of which he had no knowledge whatever.

Of course, as we have transcended physical limitations, there is no reason why we should stop. The author may consciously take the viewpoint of an invisible sprite with the power to skip about, entering into the consciousness of one character after another. Thus considered, the so-called shifting viewpoint becomes a single viewpoint. But such liberties are dangerous. The farther we stray from ordinary physical limitations, the more difficult it is for the reader to follow us.

Then there is the omniscient viewpoint, used chiefly in novels, where a wider sweep is permissible. The author assumes the superior vantage point of a god toward his characters—with the privilege of entering into their thoughts, individually or collectively, and even of telling what none of them can have thought. An author capable of handling this viewpoint without confusion or awkwardness is rare.

A collective viewpoint may be employed to advantage in some stories—and this, too, is a single viewpoint, if consistently handled. The action will center around one or two characters who are viewed externally, but not so much from the angle of a disinterested spectator as from that of the community as a whole. School stories, army stories, village stories, and others of similar nature may frequently be found illustrative of this.

As a rule, the viewpoint character is the central personage of the story; but in some instances it is necessary to narrate the incidents from the angle of a minor character. Such a viewpoint might be called the "personified shadow" viewpoint. This viewpoint is

popular in detective fiction, in which the author does not care to give away the climax by telling what is in the detective's mind, yet wishes the reader to follow his movements closely. Thus, in the Sherlock Holmes stories we have Dr. Watson as the viewpoint character—a personified shadow of the great detective. In Arthur B. Reeve's Craig Kennedy stories, the assistant, Walter Jameson, maintains the viewpoint, though the detective is the chief character.

On rare occasions it will happen that a story demands the shifting viewpoint. The beginner had better not attempt such stories. They force the reader to make a new adjustment toward the story while it is being unfolded. In skilful hands this new adjustment—this changing of trains, as it were—may be so deftly accomplished that the reader does not realize that it is happening. There will be a gradual withdrawal from one viewpoint and a gradual entering into accord with a different character. Or, again, the change may be accomplished by a definite break in the story—a chapter division, or a change of scene, or a lapse of time. Such a break does not obviate the necessity for causing the reader to make a new adjustment, but it minimizes the sense of confusion that accompanies a too abrupt transition. The break, so to speak, wipes the mental slate clean for a new beginning.

The point of view should be a writer's first consideration in planning a story. When a plot idea has been isolated, examine it first in the light of this requirement. Can the story be developed from a single point of view? If not, probably something is wrong—the details have not been sufficiently worked out. When the defect has been corrected, the question arises, whose point of view will best bring out the theme and maintain the interest. It may be suggested that usually the story belongs to the character who undergoes the most pronounced change, who passes through the most intense activity. In a mystery story, the viewpoint belongs certainly to some character who does not know the solution, but who has an intense interest in finding it out.

In actual narration, the viewpoint adopted should be impressed on the reader as early as possible—usually in the first paragraph. Thus, if Martin's thoughts are to be quoted anywhere in the course of the narrative, indicate this by quoting some of his thoughts in the opening paragraph, so that the reader may be familiarized with the point of view that is to be maintained throughout. Whatever the viewpoint of the story as a whole, try to let the opening paragraph represent it in miniature, and thereafter do not go beyond the bounds thus defined.

It should be mentioned, however, that occasionally the viewpoint may be assumed more gradually. Thus, the author may begin by describing the landscape, then several of the persons in it, then

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the central character, finally passing beyond externals and entering into the inner life and thoughts of that character. This is a process of gradually entering into the relation of that character's shadowy second-self. It is a transition by means of which the reader sloughs off his own identity in order to enter into that of the fiction character. Artistically handled, this transition may be very effective—it is a sort of “descent into matter.” But it belongs rather to long fiction than to the short-story, in which the first sentences usually fix the viewpoint.

FROM RECENT CORRESPONDENCE OF THE WORKSHOP.

I cannot be content not to acknowledge such a criticism as yours, but it is not to make a busy man write another letter. Yours are the first **constructive** criticisms I ever received. This letter and The Student-Writer, which came today, are revelations to me. The subject of unity has always left me staring vaguely into space. You make me feel that there is something definite to work for. Heretofore I have simply thrown criticised work into a drawer. I didn't know what to do with it. It is queer, too, that I **felt** all this that you have written, but didn't know what was the matter. Thank you so much!

Your criticism of _____ has reached me, and I think it good. I was myself of the opinion that the basic idea was a little shaky, but could see no way to remedy the matter. I think I can follow your suggestions and place the story now.

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Willard E. Hawkins,

**Workshop of THE STUDENT-WRITER, 1835 Champa Street,
Denver, Colorado.**